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**Concluding  
Thoughts About  
Reading Literacy in  
the United States**

American school systems deal with a very diverse population of students and successfully teach them to read. Our students, in general, compare favorably with their peers in the other countries participating in the IEA study. American 4th and 9th graders do as well as or better than students in 29 other countries participating in the study and are outperformed only by students in Finland. Only a small fraction of our student body at the 4th and 9th grade level does not meet the average for students in the OECD countries. In fact, a large proportion of our most disadvantaged students achieve or exceed this standard.

While we are doing reasonably well in comparison with many of our trading partners, our own national assessment continues to paint a different picture. The performance of students relative to the achievement standards set by the National Assessment Governing Board suggests that American students do not reach sufficient levels of reading proficiency. How one defines an adequate level of reading proficiency makes a big difference in how we see the American educational enterprise. This is an issue that should be and is considered in the public forums of state houses, state education agencies, local school districts, schools, and communities.

Despite the fact that our students are doing well overall by international standards, it is clear that there is an uneven distribution of reading proficiency. Some segments of our population do not do as well as others. We need only turn to comparisons of performance among the racial/ethnic groups and various social and economic groups to see that there still are those who do well and those who do not. Blacks, the poor, and children of the poorly educated all are at a persistent disadvantage with regard to reading proficiency. Our education systems do not seem to be ameliorating these differences as well as we might hope.

It is fairly commonplace to show that a variety of family statuses are related to student achievement. We do this, and illustrate it here with data on socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and family structure differences in reading comprehension. In a less commonplace approach, we look at the same relationships disentangled from the complex of confounding influences within which they are set. In some cases this refinement simply tells us

that the influence is not as pronounced as one would have thought on the basis of simple observation. In others, it runs counter to the observed relationship, at least in part, and changes our view of the way in which the world works. Racial/ethnic differences are nowhere as pronounced as simple observation suggests; a good part of them probably reflects the socioeconomic status differences between racial/ethnic groups. The poor economic circumstance of families per se is less of an impediment to learning than we might think. The apparent disadvantaging effects ascribed to one-parent mother-only families are not due to this family configuration as such, but rather to the fact that a variety of other disadvantaged statuses are associated with these families.

In addition to the family, the school and the community play a vital role in helping children develop their literacy skills. We approach the effects of reading comprehension on students as a classroom group using the same strategy and find that, other things equal, a school day of more than 5 hours is of benefit relative to a shorter school day—basically, more time, more learning, more achievement. We find as well some tentative evidence that smaller classes promote better achievement than larger classes. And, we find that where parents get involved with schools and support schools in their mission, the reading achievement of students benefits.

How teachers organize instruction has an important influence on achievement. This study, as all other cross-sectional studies, does not allow us to look at the effect of instruction on performance. One year's instruction will not offset the impact of all the prior years of instruction. So, with the data at hand, we can only describe the state of the art. Teachers profess a strong belief in the newer theories that focus more on the student as an active reader and learner who must bring knowledge to bear on what is being read and taught. Teachers' instructional strategies, however, are not as close to the cutting edge. It may be that reading instruction is in a state of transition.

While there is more to be done in the conceptualization and design of international studies, especially with respect to developing an understanding of why some nations seem better able to promote achievement than others, the benefits are fair-

ly clear. Any of the participating nations could develop analyses like those presented above and, in so doing, place the achievement of their students in an international perspective. In so doing, we have been able to view the achievement of various subpopulation groups against something like an international benchmark. The view was enlightening since it showed our most disadvantaged groups to fare reasonably well relative to the average student in OECD nations.

We found value too in the U.S. national data considered apart from that of other nations. It allowed us to provide a perspective on the relationships of student, family, school, and community attributes to reading achievement that took into account some of the complexity of the various factors at work.

This potential to inform nations about themselves relative to others and about the complexities of educational processes in their own nation has clear value as informational input to policy decisions designed to promote learning and to promote the learning of subpopulation groups presently disadvantaged in this respect.